

NEWS RELEASE
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
Mountain-Prairie Region
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Critical Habitat Proposed for the Saint Mary and Belly Rivers in Northwest Montana

Proposed rule will publish in the Federal Register on June 25

[Draft Federal Register Notice](#)
[Questions and Answers](#)
[Map](#)

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service is proposing critical habitat for bull trout that encompasses 88 miles of streams and 6,295 acres of lakes in the Saint Mary River and Belly River drainages in northwest Montana. This designation encompasses the Saint Mary River–Belly River population of the species.

Bull trout (*Salvelinus confluentus*) was listed as a threatened species under the Federal Endangered Species Act in 1999. The Service's action is in response to a lawsuit filed by the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Friends of the Wild Swan.

Approximately one-half of the Saint Mary River drainage and the entire headwaters of the Belly River watershed are in Glacier National Park. Both streams flow northward into Alberta, Canada where they join the South Saskatchewan River system and eventually flow to Hudson Bay. The eastern (downstream) reaches of the Saint Mary River watershed lie entirely within the boundaries of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. Details of the critical habitat proposal will be included in the maps and documents that are published along with the rule in the *Federal Register*.

When considering which areas to include in the proposed critical habitat rule, the Service required that areas contain one or both of the following: (1) spawning, rearing, foraging, or over-wintering habitat to support essential existing bull trout local populations; (2) movement corridors necessary for maintaining essential migratory life-history forms of the species.

"The Service is proposing only those specific areas determined to be essential to the bull trout's conservation, based on the best scientific information currently available," said Ralph Morgenweck, the Service's Director for the Mountain-Prairie Region. "To ensure that the final critical habitat designation is as accurate as possible we encourage people to review our proposal and provide comments and any additional information they believe is relevant. The Service will consider all available information before making a final decision."

The public will have until August 25, 2004, to comment on the proposal and provide comments and additional information. An economic analysis of the critical habitat proposal will be prepared and made available for public comment before a final decision is made. The Service may exclude areas from the final description if the benefit of exclusion outweighs the benefit of inclusion. Over the next few months, the Service will be considering whether all the areas proposed for designation are essential to the conservation of the species.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands.

In 30 years of implementing the Endangered Species Act, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Endangered Species Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and state wildlife management areas.

In January 2002, the Service and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Friends of the Wild Swan reached a court settlement establishing a schedule for the proposal of critical habitat for bull trout. The two environmental groups sued the Service for not designating critical habitat after listing bull trout in 1999 as threatened throughout its range in the lower 48 states. At the time, the Service had been unable to complete critical habitat determinations because of budget constraints.

In accordance with the court settlement, the Service also proposed to designate critical habitat for the Coastal-Puget Sound (Washington) population of bull trout and the Jarbidge River (Nevada) populations of bull trout. For the Coastal-Puget Sound population, the Service proposed 2,290 miles of streams, 52,540 acres of lakes and 985 miles of marine habitat that parallels 985 miles of shoreline in western Washington as bull trout critical habitat. For the Jarbidge River population, 131 miles of streams in Idaho and Nevada are proposed as critical habitat for bull trout are under consideration as critical habitat for bull trout.

In November 2001, also in accordance with the court settlement, the Service proposed to designate 18,175 miles of rivers and streams and 498,782 acres of lakes and reservoirs in Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana as critical habitat for the Columbia River population of bull trout. The Service also proposed at that time to designate 396 miles of streams and 33,939 acres of lakes and marshes in Oregon as critical habitat for the Klamath River Basin population of bull trout. Those proposals are expected to be finalized in September 2004.

Bull trout have declined due to habitat degradation and fragmentation, blockage of migratory corridors, poor water quality, past fisheries management, and the introduction of non-native species such as brown, lake, and brook trout. While bull trout occur over a large area, many of the populations are small and isolated from each other, making them more susceptible to local extinctions.

Bull trout are members of the char subgroup of the salmon family. They require very cold, clean water to thrive and are excellent indicators of water quality and stream health. Char have light-colored spots on a darker background, reversing the dark-spots-on-light-background pattern of trout and salmon. Bull trout have a large, flattened head and pale-yellow to crimson body spots on an olive green to brown background. They lack teeth in the roof of the mouth.

Some bull trout populations are migratory, spending portions of their life cycle in larger rivers, lakes or marine environments before returning to smaller streams to spawn, while others complete their entire life cycle in the same stream. They can grow to more than 20 pounds in lake environments and live up to 12 years. Under exceptional circumstances, they can live more than 20 years.

The critical habitat proposal for the St. Mary-Belly River, Coastal-Puget Sound and Jarbidge River populations of bull trout will be published in the *Federal Register* on June 25, 2004 initiating a 60-day comment period that ends on August 25, 2004. Comments may be sent to John Young, Bull Trout Coordinator, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 911 N.E. 11th Avenue, Portland, OR 97232. Comments may also be submitted on our Bull Trout Website at or faxed to r1bulltroutch@r1.fws.gov John Young at 503-231-6243.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 544 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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